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The Relevance of Mahatma Gandhi's Philosophy for the 21st Century[1]

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Abstract. The central question emphasized by the paper is that whether in the 21st century's globalized world the Gandhian message still has or could have any actuality in managing our century's real challenges such as terrorism or the deepening moral crisis of the humanity.
In order to be able to do this, the paper will first of all present, analyse and comment on the most important concepts I consider the Gandhian thought is based on such as satya (Truth), ahimsa (non-violence) and satyagraha (as Gandhi loosely translated: holding on to truth, which in fact is the philosophy and practice of the non-violent resistance). I have to admit that in my paper I will consider Gandhi as a philosopher or a thinker even if he did not agree with me or even if it were hard to consider him a philosopher according to European traditions and European canon regarding philosophy. As we know, he personally declared that writing an academic text was beyond his power and he was not built for such kind of writings.
Secondly, the paper will emphasize those aspects and concepts of the Gandhian thought which could give an answer to the core question of the paper, trying to prove that at least two of the presented concepts could be considered relevant and useful in our times, even if at first impression all of these key concepts of the Gandhian thought seem to be a utopia and useless. It seems that Gandhi, through his ideas and thoughts, "is still alive" and is among us after more than 60 years of his death. It seems that we, all human beings, still have to learn from the ideas, from the writings and acts of the Mahatma.

Keywords: Gandhi, Mahatma, truth, satya, ahimsa, satyagraha, relevance

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„*The problem of human conflict is perhaps the most fundamental problem of all time*"
(Joan V. Bondurant)

„*My life is my message.*"
(M. K. Gandhi)

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, one of the greatest and well-known personalities of the 20th century, had a very deep influence on the second part of the last century, which is incontestable and beyond any dispute. Then again, there are voices which proclaim that even in our globalized world the Gandhian spiritual heritage still has its actuality and relevance.

What this paper tries is to give an answer regarding the relevance of the Gandhian thought in the 21st century. Thus, I will try to demonstrate that the Gandhian spiritual heritage – with accent on the concepts of satya (Truth), ahimsa (non-violence) and satyagraha (as Gandhi loosely translated, holding on to truth or "[T]he force which is born of Truth and Love or nonviolence" (Gandhi 1999a: 93), which in fact is the philosophy and practice of the nonviolent resistance) – should have or must have an important role in dealing with the real problems of our globalized world. In order to do this, first of all, I will have to outline the meanings of the three above-mentioned categories and, after having done so, I will try to emphasize those aspects of the Gandhian concepts which I think that could be considered relevant in our times or could be useful and helpful in managing some of the real challenges of the 21st century such as the problem of armed clashes, globalizing terrorism or the moral crisis of humanity.

At the beginning, I think we can agree that we are living in a world which is divided increasingly day by day by global unrest, fear, anger, hatred, discontent, despair, immorality etc., and the number and intensity of ethnic and religious conflicts seem to grow, gaining higher and higher intensity all around the world.

In my opinion, Gandhi's political and social philosophy in general and his approach to the concepts of Truth, non-violence and satyagraha in particular, could be the starting point of the regeneration or rebirth of non-violent or less violent cultures and societies. The whole non-violent philosophy of the Mahatma, based on the two core concepts of the Gandhian heritage, is not a new proposition. Gandhi himself says that "I have nothing new to teach the World. Truth and non-violence are as old as the hills. All I have done is to try experiments in both on as vast scale as I could." (Gandhi 1960: iii) In other words, we can say that the Mahatma just tried to revive and to make much more understandable those old teachings for the whole world, to make them usable in the new social and political context.

Gandhi pictured to himself how an ideal society, based on love, truth and non-violence must look and function, and he tried to realize it as much as possible in

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the real life. His attempts and results in making this operable have had echoes and followers all around the world. For example, Edward Thompson wrote in his paper, *Gandhi: A Character Study*: "he will be remembered as one of the very few who have set the stamps of an idea on an epoch. That idea is 'non-violence' which has drawn out powerfully the sympathy of other lands." (Radhakrishnan 2010: 297)

As I said before, one of the most important fundamental concepts of the Gandhian thought should be considered the concept of satya or Truth. The importance of satya is underlined, too, by the fact that the Mahatma's *Autobiography* was entitled by himself "The story of my experiments with Truth", which let us deduce the importance of Truth in his everyday life. As a self-statement of the Mahatma regarding the importance of the Truth in his life, I will quote a part from one of his letters addressed to Narandas Gandhi.

"Generally speaking, [observance of the law of] Truth is understood merely to mean that we must speak the truth. But we in the Ashram[2] should understand the word satya or Truth in a much wider sense. There should be Truth in thought, Truth in speech and Truth in action." (Gandhi 1999b: 383)

As we can conclude from this quotation, for Gandhi, the concept of Truth has a much deeper sense than it is understood by the majority in the everyday life. Over and above of truth-saying or abstention from lies, for Gandhi, the term of satya has extensions on all levels of the everyday life, such as the level of thinking, of talking and even the level of acting, which means that Truth is the category which has to be permanently present in our life and, at the same time, it is the measure of our thought, speech and acts.

I think it is not necessary to make a detailed presentation regarding the role and the importance of the satya in the major Indian religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism or Jainism. I consider that it is enough to state that the above-mentioned term – just like the another core concept, the ahimsa – has a central role in every Indian religion which influenced the thought of the Mahatma. We have just to remember the "Satyannasti paro dharmah" or "there is no Dharma higher than Truth" aphorism, which is well-known in every village in India and which propagates the superiority of the Truth above all. But equally known is the postulate "Ahimsa paramo Dharmah" or the "Non-violence is the supreme religion or engagement". These terms can be easily found in the religious texts of Hinduism (such as the Upanisads, Bhagavad Gita, the Mahabharata, The Laws of Manu, etc.) and, at the same time, it could be considered basic concepts both in Jainism and Buddhism.

In the next part of the paper, I will try to sketch what Gandhi was thinking about these concepts. As we could find in his writings – especially in his *Autobiography* – Gandhi, except for a short period of his youth, was deeply

2 Traditionally, the word's meaning is spiritual hermitage, a place far away from populated areas, suitable for meditations and prayers. Today, the sense of the word has changed and it could be described as a teaching or cultural space, a kind of school.

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religious. In his *Autobiography*, he states: "What I want to achieve—what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years—is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain moksha." (Gandhi 1999c: 90)

However, his piety does not mean that he is simply a follower of Hinduism. During his studies in England and his work in South Africa, he continuously and thoroughly studied the major religions of the World, such as Jainism, Christianity, Buddhism or Islam. Quoting Lord Bhikhu Parekh's words: "Although he was profoundly influenced by Hinduism, Christianity and Jainism, his religious thought cut across all of them and was in a class by itself. Belief in God was obviously its basis."(Parekh 1997: 26) His religiosity, according to Akeel Bilgrami, was "eclectic and individual" (Bilgrami 2011: 93), a mix between what was given to him as a child by his mother and what he achieved from other religions and philosophies during his study in England and his stay in South Africa, such as Jainism, Buddhism, Islam and even Christianity. Due to these influences, his religiosity became a very maverick mix, and that is why he was considered very often Christian or even Jain among the Hindus.

The Mahatma himself makes a statement regarding his open-minded and open-hearted interest shown in other religions than Hinduism. He says that "My religion enables me, obliges me, to imbibe all that is good in all the great religions of the earth." (Gandhi 1999d: 27) And to have an idea how the Mahatma was selecting all the good things from a religion, we have to quote him again. In one of his writings entitled "Sanatana Hindu", he states: "I am not a literalist. Therefore, I try to understand the spirit of the various scriptures of the world. I apply the test of Truth and Ahimsa laid down by these very scriptures for interpretation. I reject what is inconsistent with that test, and I appropriate all that is consistent with it."(Gandhi 1999e: 335)

It is very important to observe that the attitude of Gandhi regarding the major world religions was rather an interpretative–explanative attitude than a dogmatic and mystic one. The Mahatma was concerned about the spiritual, philosophical message of a religion and not about the written revelation of the sacred books. This kind of attitude allowed Gandhi to formulate critical remarks and disapprobative observations and to oppose some elements of his own religion (for example, child marriage, the status of the harijans or untouchables, etc.). This kind of interpretative–explanative attitude characterizes his philosophical approach towards the concepts of ahimsa and satya, too. These two concepts have been developed and improved in their meanings and became the core concepts of the Gandhian heritage.

The concept of ahimsa was used as a synonym of the Brahman (God) in the ancient religious literature of the Hinduism. According to this religious tradition, the Mahatma considers that the Truth must be more than a moral idea or an ethical demand. He states that God is Truth: "My religion is based on truth and non-violence. Truth is my God. Non-violence is the means of realizing Him." (Gandhi 1999f: 61–62)

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A direct consequence of this statement is that in his early period Gandhi is thinking about truth as one of the many other qualities or attributes of the God. At the same time, the concept of God enjoys logical priority over ahimsa because the last one only describes or characterizes the first one.

A few years later, due to his experiments with truth, the Mahatma reconsiders his view and he decides that it is much more exact and correct to say that Truth is God than God is Truth. About this process of enlightenment he wrote: "I would say with those who say God is Love, God is Love. But deep down in me I used to say that though God may be Love, God is Truth, above all. If it is possible for the human tongue to give the fullest description of God, I have come to the conclusion that, for myself, God is Truth. But two years ago I went a step further and said that Truth is God. You will see the fine distinction between the two statements: God is Truth and Truth is God. And that conclusion I came to after a continuous, relentless search after Truth which began so many years ago. I found that the nearest approach to Truth is through love. But I found also that love has many meanings, in the English language at least, and human love in the sense of passion becomes a degrading thing also. I found too that love in the sense of ahimsa and nonviolence has only limited number of votaries in the world. And as I made progress in my search, I made no dispute with 'God is love'. It is very difficult to understand 'God is love' (because of a variety of meanings of love) but I never found a double meaning in connection with Truth and not even atheists have denied the necessity or power of Truth. Not only so. In their passion for discovering Truth, they have not hesitated even to deny the very existence of God—from their own point of view rightly. And it was because of their reasoning that I saw that I was not going to say 'God is Truth', but 'Truth is God.'" (Gandhi 1999g: 261)

We have to mention that, as a Hindu, Gandhi understood satya to be synonymous with the stem *sat*, which is reality itself, which means being. In this way, Truth became God and not only an attribute of God. Thus, Satya (Truth) and Sat (Being) became denominations of the very same substantial because, in the new definition given by Gandhi, Truth is described as Being. In a letter written to P. G. Matthew, Gandhi himself explains that in the "Truth is God" statement truth has to be interpreted as God and not as an attribute of God. At the same time, the one and only being is God; God is, besides him, nothing else exists, which means that "therefore the more truthful we are, the nearer we are to God. We are only to the extent that we are truthful." (Gandhi 1999h: 128)

As we could see, in Gandhian interpretation, the Truth – in addition to its ethical or moral dimension – gets a new, ontological dimension, too, because the Truth denotes Being, the complex entirety of all beings, including those we know and those we did not or could not know. Thus, the Truth gets a transcendental meaning and becomes synonymous to God, taking God's role in the life of Mahatma and becoming appropriate as the subject of religious practices, of

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unconditioned human adoration and devotion. According to his idea of Absolute Truth, Gandhi was able to consider not only the satya as the real basis of every being – and in such a way, the basis of the whole human society –, but at the same time he defined every human being as "truth-seeker". He could do this because the direct consequence of the faith in the Absolute Truth is that every human being will share in this Absolute Truth or God. A human being could remain a moral one only if it embodies and continuously seeks the truth, because the truth is the substratum of morality, where morality means not only the forbearance from lying or the conviction that we must say the truth because this is the most adequate and profitable attitude in the long run, but it has to mean that our whole life must be subordinated to the law of truth, even in cases when such a situation can have an undesirable consequence. Gandhi claims that the abstracted and unworldly truth has its worth only in case that it is embodied in human beings who are ready to die for the truth. For this Western part of the world, it could be hard to understand what Gandhi means because in our minds the truth is an epistemological question and not an ontological one or a question of practical philosophy. In Gandhi's way of thinking, the truth in his narrow epistemological sense is only a part of what satya means. This could be called latent truth because, according to the Gandhian thought, the truth is realized or materialized only when it is enacted, when it is embodied in action.

According to Hinduism, a human being is not able to realize the Absolute Truth while imprisoned in the cycle of rebirths, which means that we have to accept that everything we can grasp is only relative. Because of this, every human being has a fragmentary grasp of the truth and in order to be able to get closer to the Absolute Truth we have to recognize the partiality of our perception of truth and to act open-minded towards the truth that comes from other people. That is why is wise not to impose one's truth on another. And if we could accept and understand that not one single man can be the possessor of the Absolute Truth, we would exclude violence from our lives because we would be able to recognize our partial perception of truth, to listen to others and to accept their point of view regarding truth.At the same time, the relativity of truth led Gandhi to teach the necessity of making the means continuous with the ends sought. If a human being could see only partially the truth, then he or she had to focus on the purity of means. Paying attention to the means is very important because, according to the Gandhian thought, only good means lead to good ends. It is impossible, for example, to obtain peace through violence or violent acting. Gandhi repeated several times that those who sow violence, will reap violence, but who sows peace and non-violence, will reap peace.

As in the case of the satya, the roots of the Gandhian concept of ahimsa could be found in the religious tradition of India, being "a cardinal virtue of the Hinduism through the centuries". (Rynne 2009) In addition to satya, the ahimsa

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can be considered the second fundamental category of the Gandhian philosophy. According to his religious thought, he had been rejecting violence from early beginning. He was proud that the religious tradition of the Hinduism and of India in general refused the use of violence. "The most distinctive and the largest contribution of Hinduism to India's culture is the doctrine of ahimsa. It has given a definite bias to the history of the country for the last three thousand years and over, and it has not ceased to be a living force in the lives of India's millions even today. It is a growing doctrine, its message is still being delivered. Its teaching has so far permeated our people that an armed revolution has almost become an impossibility in India, not because, as some would have it, we as a race are physically weak, for it does not require much physical strength so much as a devilish will to press a trigger to shoot a person, but because the tradition of ahimsa has struck deep roots among the people." (Gandhi 1999i: 143)

Besides his religious belief, he declined violence because of historical experiences and observations. He witnessed the ongoing carnage that resulted from the practice of retaliation during the years he spent in South Africa, in the First and Second World War, in the Hindu–Muslim conflicts and between individuals. He read and knew history, but at the same time he experienced, too, the destructive power of violence several times. That is why he states: "My experience daily growing stronger and richer tells me that there is no peace for individuals or for nations without practising truth and nonviolence to the uttermost extent possible for man. The policy of retaliation has never succeeded. We must not be confounded by the isolated illustrations of retaliation, including frauds and force, having attained temporary and seeming success. The world lives because there is more love than hate, more truth than untruth in it. This is a proposition capable of being verified by everyone who will take the trouble to think. Fraud and force are diseases, truth and non-violence is health. The fact that the world has not perished is an ocular demonstration of the fact that there is more health than disease in it." (Gandhi 1999j: 29)

During the Second World War, he declared that Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini will demonstrate once again the emptiness of violence, which means in his perception that all the violence used by the above-mentioned people has an immediate effect, which is, as a matter of fact, transitory and will leave behind hatred and devastation. From his point of view, only the "effects of Buddha's non-violent action persist and are likely to grow with age." (Gandhi 1999k: 261)

As he did in the case of the concept of satya, he operates important meaning changes in the sense of the ahimsa, too. Despite of its negative prefix (ahimsa or non-violence), Gandhi was able to make from this fundamental concept an active force and to charge it with positive energy and sense. Ahimsa went beyond its usual understanding: refusal to do harm and become a quality or attribute of a satyagrahi, which enables him in conflict situations to act in "a positive, non-

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judging, creatively forbearing and loving way." (Rynne 2009: 58) Ahimsa has to be more than a rejection of everything which needs violence; it is not a passive status or condition. In Gandhian philosophy, it is one of the most active forces of the world, which could be understood as love or charity in the positive, biblical sense of the word, which is exposed in the Sermon on the Mount or in a poem of a Gujarati poet that sounds like this: "There is no merit in returning good for good. Merit lies in returning good for evil." (Rynne 2009: 60)

As we could see, in the Gandhian spiritual heritage, the concept of ahimsa gets a positive sense and it is understood as a "universal law acting under all circumstances" (Gandhi 1999l: 93-94), as "one of the world's great principles which no power on earth can wipe out". (Gandhi 1999m: 374) It is considered by the Mahatma as a new weapon in politics, which is in the process of evolution. Its vast possibilities are yet unexplored, and this exploration can take place only if it is practised on a big scale and in various fields.

In the Gandhian spiritual heritage, as we could see, there is a mutual relationship between satya and ahimsa, between Truth and non-violence. This mutual relationship could be useful to treat the negative aspects of the globalization, such as the ethnic and religious conflicts are or the existing moral crisis, which is the source of economic and financial crises. Using the words of Margaret Chatterjee, Gandhi has "pinpointed violence as the chief malady of the modern times". (Rynne 2009: 57) One of the fails of our modern time is that its trying to manage those violent acts we can see all around the world and almost day by day has been unsuccessful till now.

If this statement is true, it remains a very logical question to ask: if the globalization, which is sustained on several levels all around the world, was not able to cope with this violence, if the history of the last two decades shows us that our efforts in violent fighting has had as goal the domination of the other, the political and economic control of the other, then what are we waiting for? A domination of the other, obtained by using brute force and violence, is not a guarantee of less violence on the part of those who are dominated, and this way the dominant party could become very easily the dominated one and, at the same time, the sufferer of the resulting violence.

Our question must be what we have to do to cure this malady with good results. And the answer could be: to listen to what Gandhi says about ahimsa and satya, about non-violence and truth, and to follow his teachings. We have to understand to be aware of using violence against others because violence leads to violent responses and, at the same time, it concentrates power in the hands of a few people, which is the contrary to what democracy means. And, finally, the violence leads to psychical suffering and degradation, which contradict human dignity.

We have to remember that the Gandhian way of non-violent resistance against the brute force of the colonialism was successful. At the same time, we are not to

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forget that the social reform and civil rights movement of Martin Luther King in the USA or the anti-apartheid resistance of South Africa under the leadership of Nelson Mandela became effective after the leaders managed their campaigns on the basis of the Gandhian satyagraha, which relies on the concepts of ahimsa and satya. The same story happened in Poland in the late seventies – early eighties with the anti-communist movement of *Solidarity*, and the result is well-known: Poland became the first democratic country in the former Eastern Bloc of the communist countries.

All these are obvious and self-evident examples of the fact that the Gandhian political philosophy, the so-called "moral jiu-jitsu"[3] (Gregg 1966: 43-51) could have real and concrete results in cases when violence and brute force are not efficient. His multidimensional social and political thought is derived from India's thousand-years-old religious and philosophical traditions, but it was rethought and developed according to the real challenges of the modern times by his own experiments during his non-violent fight against the colonialism in South Africa and India.

Finally, at the end of my paper, to stress and underline the great personality of the Mahatma, let me quote two character-drawings concerning Him. The first one is from an Indian thinker and former president of India, the second one from a German, one of the first Christian leaders arrested by the Nazis.

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan says in his book that "[s]ince Buddha, Gandiji was the greatest moral force in Indian history. For the accomplishment of liberty, justice and peace, he rediscovered the old techniques of Ahmisa and Satyagraha. He revealed to the masses a power not of rifles and machine guns, but the power innate in each individual, a power which this war-haunted world can exploit fully in making wars impossible." (Radhakrishnan 2010) At the same time, Martin Niemoeller's words are quoted by Rynne in his book: "When the Christian church and Christian world did not do anything effective about peacemaking, God found a prophet of nonviolence in Mahatma Gandhi [...]. In our days Gandhi has shown this to a great part of the world, and I wish that Christians would not be the last group of men and women to learn the lesson that God is teaching us through this prophet." (Rynne 2009: 169)

After all these being said, the only questions for me remains whether we, the people of the 21st century, are moral, open-minded and wise enough to understand the Gandhian teaching and to apply it in our everyday life, irrespective of the fact that we are statesmen, policy makers, businessmen or simple world citizens.

I only could hope that the answer is yes. I hope an affirmative answer because I think that the message of the Gandhian heritage could be considered universal,

3 The term of "moral jiu-jitsu" is a very plastic expression because it creates an analogy with the martial art jiu-jitsu, which is based on the fact that a person will be able to defeat his enemy only in case that he is able to use the energy of the opponent against him.

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irrespective of time, geographical space and cultural background, thus relevant even in the 21st century because it is based on such values as truth (satya), non-violence (ahimsa), human dignity and respect and the love of our fellow beings.

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